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A VOLUNTARY READING PROGRAM (VRP) TO STIMULATE EFL READING INTEREST

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the implementation of a Voluntary Reading Program (VRP) which aims at stimulating an EFL reading interest among Indonesian EFL college students. This qualitative study conducted within seven weeks to EFL college students of State Islamic Institute of Tulungagung attending a practice course on Cultivating EFL Reading Habits formally set for eight meetings. This course is intended to address a big concern on the strategy to better stimulate EFL students' reading habits. By the end of the program, through an interview done to all participants, the program indicates positive effect on stimulating the EFL college students to read for some reasons. Reading brings about great advantages to widen their knowledge and set awareness that reading is not a difficult activity since they can read a lot through their mobile phones (online reading). written texts found anywhere, or even any ads hanged on the walls. In a nutshell, this program proves to be a good way of stimulating good habit of EFL reading for EFL college students.

Key Words: voluntary reading program; to stimulate; reading interest

ABSTRAK

Artikel ini mengeksplorasi implementasi Program Membaca Sukarela (PMS) yang bertujuan menstimulasi daya tarik membaca bacaan berbahasa Inggris bagi mahasiswa Indonesia yang belajar bahasa Inggris sebagai bahasa asing. Penelitian qualitative dalam waktu 7 minggu kepada mahasiswa Prodi Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris yang mengikuti mata kuliah praktikum "Cultivating EFL Reading Habits" secara formal dijadwalkan dalam waktu 8 minggu. Penelitian ini dilakukan karena perhatian besar terhadap permasalahan kebiasaan membaca para pembelajar bahasa Inggris sebagai bahasa asing. Di akhir Program, melalui wawancara kepada seluruh peserta, Program ini mempunyai efek positif untuk menstimulasi mahasiswa bahasa Inggris untuk membaca karena membaca bermanfaat untuk memperluas pengetahuan mereka dan memunculkan kesadaran bahwa membaca merupakan kegiatan yang tidak sulit karena mereka bisa membaca banyak hal melalui HP (Online reading), tulisan-tulisan yang ditemukan dimana-mana atau bahkan iklan yang dipasang di dinding. Singkatnya, Program Membaca Sukarela terbukti sebagai cara yang baik untuk menstimulasi mahasiswa bahasa Inggris untuk mencintai membaca bacaan-bacaan berbahasa Inggris.

Kata Kunci: program membaca sukarela; menslimulasi; ketertarikan membaca

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INTRODUCTION

People agree that English has been developed to be a global language because firstly it has some kind of a special status- official language of a country- in over seventy countries. Secondly, English has become the priority in a country's foreign language teaching (Crystal, 2003), as it is in Indonesia. English signs, for example, are easily found in every public building, international forum, internationalized published books, and even in ads of internationally consumed products.

More importantly, with the establishment of ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) 2015- a unity of ten ASEAN countries which are Indonesia, Thailand, Myanmar, Laos, Vietnam, Malaysia, Singapore, Philippine, Cambodia, and Brunei, the role of English is getting more significant especially among the members of AEC. This is because English is decided to be the formal language for business. English plays a critical role in improving productivity, boosting competitiveness and ensuring sustained job creation (Chang, 2014). As written in *Wall Street English Thailand* that to help improve the economy of Thailand, they need to improve their English. This is due to the fact that workers with better English skills will help not only

improve the economy and attract more foreign investment to benefit the countries but also make their countries be more competitive. Therefore, because in Indonesia English is still struggling, various innovative and practical ways of improving the teaching and learning English especially that in English Education program need to be sustainably done in order to attract their interest in reading English.

Indonesian people know that reading is significant to improve their quality of lives. Just take for example a Javanese Slogan stating "*Hurub Hambangun Praja*" written in each entrance gate of Blitar region - a homeland of the first president of Indonesia. The slogan shows the importance of literacy which can be simply indicated by being able to read and write (Blake and Hanley, as cited in Cambridge Assessment 2013) to build a nation. However, in relation to English as a subject, Cambridge Assessment (2013) further reported that literacy is not simply a set of static skills, but must involve literacy in action, critical literacy, literacy as social practice, and multiple literacy. Still, the awareness of this knowledge into the fact to do reading practice is considered imbalance.

In Indonesian context, particularly EFL students mostly read because of fulfilling their school assignment. It is rarely found students read for their own interest. This situation is clearly described in several articles describing a low level of Indonesian reading interest (0.049% as reported by Hidayat (2015) and Afrisia-CNN Indonesia (2015). Moreover, the interest of reading English amongst the EFL students in Indonesia is considered low (Iftanti, 2012). This is partly due to the fact that historically Indonesia has had an oral culture and has not yet completely built a literacy culture, but is unavoidable that Indonesia has to adopt a very fast advancement of technology- gadgetry era- by which young generation especially has been much involved in it.

In short, it is a matter especially whoever has a great concern in building good reading culture although it is not that ease to cultivate a good habit of reading either in L1 or L2 or FL. So, it is essential to make efforts on how to stimulate an interest of EFL students' reading English and how they do real reading. One of the ways is by implementing a Voluntary Reading Program (VRP) which is inspired by a reading log program.

Voluntary reading or recreational reading has an essential effect to

support the improvement of the other English language skills and components. As stated by Krashen (2004) that it has a powerful effect on developing reading, writing, grammar, and vocabulary. Free voluntary reading- *book flood*, *Extensive Reading (ER)*, which is defined as reading in quantity in order to gain a general understanding of what is read is intended to develop good reading habits and to encourage a liking of reading. (Richards and Schmidt, 2002). It has positive effect on L2 reading attitude which may indeed enhance the decision to read and create a virtuous circle of reading (Yamashita, 2013). Therefore, implementing voluntary reading to stimulate a love of reading is worthy.

This program was implemented to 33 students attending a Practice Course namely 'Cultivating Reading Habits'. This course has zero credit point so that the students' final score is indicated by passing or failing. Since this course has no effect on their Cumulative Achievement Index Points, they are not totally involved in any Practice Courses. Unlike regular subjects, this course has formally been conducted in only eight meetings. Hence, the students who get much involved in this VRP program or those who have motivation to read or are

stimulated to read because this program can be used as the indicators of their love of reading. So that this study is intended to explore how Voluntary Reading Program can stimulate EFL college students to have reading interest in English. Therefore, to know the idea of real reading practices and voluntary reading activities is helpful to conduct this VRP.

Reading is not only decoding words but finding ideas beyond the texts as well. Through real reading, readers spent their time to purposely get something from the written symbols. Doing real reading is indicated by some attributes as stated by Cross (1991): (1) Choice. This means that readers read not a prescribed time but they selectively read when they want or read to. (2) Purpose. This second attribute indicates that readers read for a reason such as for reading for enjoyment (reading literary works), for information (newspaper, flight schedule), for knowledge (a scholarly journal or book), for curiosity (a guide book), for satisfying a need (instruction for a new mobile phone. Indeed, the purpose of real reading is not to analyze the syntax or scrutinize every word. Reading strategies. The approach of each reading purpose and text type is different. Real readers do not read a newspaper in the same way as they

read a literary work. A difficult document for instance might be read several times in order to understand every nuance. However, they sometimes read in a rush to long article just by scanning to get an especially interesting part. (4) Quantity. Every day, real readers read a great deal, for instance: posters, advertisements, traffic sign, personal messages, shop names, and anything which attracts their attention. They have much of that sort of casual reading all the time. (5) Silence. Real readers read silently in the literate societies, except for TV or radio announcers, or a on trip announcer as that on a train, stewardess, or master of ceremony who read sometimes visually, not out aloud. (6) Speed. Concerning the speed of reading, real readers read swiftly with which they can read a passage far more quickly that it could be spoken. Slow readers often the product of schools where reading aloud was the norm. They often continue the words they read privately to the mouth. An efficient reader can enjoy a thick newspaper, reading selectively, in less than an hour. (7) Context. Real readers read through difficulties, coping with complex syntax and strange lexical items and getting the general meaning from the linguistic context. They do not read at dictionary at out side.

Unlike voluntary reading which is commonly done for the sake of their own interest, the standard reading procedures in reading classes often have little relationship with real purposeful reading as indicated by the above mentioned attributes. Hence, Cross (1991) further offers some valuable points to improve the matter. (1) It is difficult to allow students to read selectively, as they do in their mother tongue and language learners usually read when told to, not from choice. Then, a teacher can increase the students' desire to read a passage by arousing interest in the topic and the interest level of the text the teacher selects is a key factor in enhancing their wish to read and providing the students with a class or school library. (2) In term of purpose, a teacher can make class reading purposeful by setting appropriate focus tasks for the while-reading phase and any follow-up. (3) Concerning the strategies of reading, a teacher should cultivate the sub skills of reading and the associate reading strategies. (4) A teacher should also support the students to read more, because the more the students read, the better. (5) Cultivate a norm for silent reading among the students and constantly urge them toward greater reading speeds but bearing in mind the nature of text and the task as well. (6) In relation to context, the teacher should

resist the temptation to explain every new word. Let the students learn to cope with passages which include lexical items and grammar structures that they have not met.

A voluntary reading can be done in a school context- a school free reading- which is also well known as Sustained-Silent Reading. This can be defined as providing books in the classroom with which both students and teacher can read at the same time. It is not necessary for students to bring their own reading books. It is considered as gold standard for demonstrating the effectiveness of recreational reading (Krashen, 2004). It is practically done by devoting a few minutes each day (about 10 - 15) to do recreational reading.

METHOD

The qualitative method applied in doing this study consists of two procedures, i.e. Developing Voluntary Reading Program and Assessment Procedures. Both steps are explained below.

Developing Voluntary Reading Program (VRP)

This Voluntary Reading Program is adapted from an extensive reading program which is generally associated

with reading large amount with the aim of getting an overall understanding of the material (Bamford and Day, 1997). This program as stated by Bell (1998) was established integrated into classroom teaching with which the learners would get an access to class library so that they would have a wide range exposures of graded readers. Students' reading was then carefully monitored. Formal and informal records on their reading practices including the books they read and their comments on they have read were also kept in reading diaries and book reports with a card file system to document the program. The reading program implemented in the present study follows the timeline for seven week reading practices with the guidelines below.

- 1) Students select their own reading materials

This step is essentially given to the students in order to select their own interesting reading materials. Self-selected reading materials increase the students' interest and motivation which will further result in nurturing a love of reading English in particular. This is because they have successfully made their reading meaningful. The meaningful reading will hopefully attract EFL students to conduct a sustained reading which finally brings

about a love of reading English. It is suggested to read reading materials of any types- books on any topics, articles published in newspapers, magazines, comic books, short stories, flyers, shopping items for examples- as many as they can during this program. Students feel free on their own reading choices.

- 2) Students select the right difficulty level of the reading materials

One of the ways to attract the EFL students' love of reading is giving them chance of reading English at their own level of difficulties. This leads the students to get comfort and pleasure during the reading practice. Moreover, if it is achieved, they will gradually establish a love of reading.

- 3) Students write their reading response in a reading log

In this step, the students write their reading response in a reading log assigned by the lecturer.

- 4) Students orally report their reading activities weekly

This step is done to ensure that the Voluntary Reading Program runs as being approved by both the lecturer and the students. The students report what they have read during a week. The lecturer addresses some question in

accordance with the students' reading log. This is considered as part of assessment procedure which is intended to check the students' changes on reading behavior, particularly reading interest in English.

The participants of this study were 33 students of the third semester of English Education Program of IAIN Tulungagung that were taking a practice course on Cultivating EFL Reading Habits. They joined this VRP for 2 months. The data which were in the form of information concerning with the progress of their reading interest were collected through interviewing the participants and taking a look at the document of their reading logs. The collected data were then qualitatively analyzed.

Assessment Procedures

In order to know whether the objective of this program is successfully achieved, it is necessary to conduct an assessment by means of interviewing the students. This program is evaluated through the following procedures:

1) Pre-Reading Program

In this step, the students are confirmed about their reading interest in English. The questions include Do you like reading? If yes, how much do you love reading? Those questions are

distributed to all students and they respond in written. This is done to avoid from a pressing condition.

2) Weekly Reading Program

In this step, the questions addressed are aimed at asking their reading practices during one week. The students were bringing their reading logs during this confirmation assessment. The questions were developed based on the students' reading report:

- a). What did you read so far?;
- b). Did you select your own reading materials?;
- c). Which reading materials do you like best?;
- d). What is the summary of your favorite reading materials?;
- e). How long do you read your selected materials?;
- f). What difficulties did you find during the reading practices?;
- g). What interesting things could you get from your selected reading materials?.

3) Post Reading Program

In the step, the assessment is emphasized on the result of conducting this VRP- whether the EFL students' love of reading stimulated or not. So

that, the question is what do you think about this program? Does it stimulate your reading English? and now do you love reading because of this program?.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Pre-Reading Program

This study found that almost all of them are not willing to and interested in reading: they do not love reading both Indonesian and English materials. What they understand about reading is reading books and it is not easy to find books in their environment. It is partly because of the limited number of available books. Dewi - the head of *Ikatan Penerbit Indonesia (IKAPI)*- Indonesian Publisher Organization- as reported by Afrisia-CNN Indonesia (2015) stated that Indonesia has classic problem on reading interest and book distribution. She further explained that this is due to the fact that historically Indonesia has had an oral culture and has not yet completely built a literacy culture. Book publication in Indonesia is moreover not in balance with the people' needs to read.

Weekly Reading Program

The finding of weekly interviewing the students indicates that the students' interest gradually

increases although it is not quite significant. This can be seen from the following description.

a) What did you read so far?

Week 1: The students' response toward this question is various. It was found that 18 out of 33 students (about 54.33%) read a very simple story such that written by Stannard Allen. This is what they can find to read and they understand the whole meaning of the text. The point is that they do read their selected materials. And what is meant by being able to read as stated in Iwahori (2008) that when learners are able to recognize words accurately and rapidly, they have greater capacity for attention leading to comprehending a text. Meanwhile, the other 8 students (24.33%) read articles available in their English books. This fact indicates that the students are not motivated to find any reading materials since they do not want to read. Reading is not an interesting activity done in their spare time. They prefer chatting with their groups (culturally Indonesia people are attached in groups they comfort to communicate with each other). Hence they read what they can easily find to read, although they are not really willing to read. It is done just to fulfill this assignment. Unfortunately, the rest 7 students (21.33%) did not read anything and wrote no reading diary

for some reasons namely they do not know what to read, how to find reading materials, when to start reading materials, and which reading materials were assigned to read. This seems that at the beginning of this program the students were not really engaged in this program and are not interested to read.

Week 2: In the second week, it seems that the students' interest in reading little bit increases. This can be seen from the variety of reading materials which is not only very simple short story, but articles on social problem as well. There are 28 students (84.33%) who reported their reading activities. This shows an increasing interest of students to read. Meanwhile, the rest 5 students (15.33%) did not read any reading materials and made no report. This indicates that they were not totally involved in this program. They got no punishment but they were motivated to read.

Week 3: In this week, the number of students reporting their reading practices remains the same- 28 students. The variety of reading materials is not only simple short story, texts available in their English book, and articles on social problem, but also article on sport. Regardless demanding of fulfilling this voluntary reading project, there is an effort to find their reading materials. This shows slightly shifting

phenomenon from reading by force to reading for enjoyment. It was also found that they read because they want to read their selected materials. Accordingly, although they encounter some difficult words, they could be strategic to complete their reading.

Week 4: Although in the fourth week there were still 3 students (9.33%) who did not report their reading log, it was found that some of the students possessing mobile phones connected to internet get much more ease to find reading materials. They read online newspapers and fairytales. Moreover, they said that they were happy to be able to make use of their mobile phone as a reading source. Still, many of them find some printed reading materials from the library and their instructional materials.

Week 5: In the almost end of the program, every student showed their reading log. Again to check whether they have read and selected their reading materials, the interview assessment was done. It was found that most of them did read their own selected materials, although when they were asked to retell their selected reading materials, they sometimes could not completely do so, because to remember all the things from a text they have read sometime ago is not easy. The reading duration was getting

longer ranging from 10 minutes to 90 minutes. The students who in the previous weeks did not report their reading said that they actually read for their school assignment. Since they thought what they did is not part of this VRP program, they did not write any report.

Week 6: In this week, the students' reading activities reported in their reading log was quite different from those done in the previous week. All students were seriously involved in this program. They voluntarily select their own reading materials in English and read them. It was found that most of the students keep reading narrative text, simple short story and fairy tales. In addition, some of them read their instructional materials available in their course books. The reading duration was also getting more which is ranging from 10 to 100 minutes. This indicates that they were stimulated to read.

Week 7: In the last week of this VRP, all students were patiently in queue to show their reading logs and take part in weekly individual reading assessment. It is found that most of them (69%) are indicated to be stimulated to read their own various selected reading materials. It can be seen from their responses to the confirmation questions addressed to them. They had positive attitude (looks

enjoy, open and motivated) during the assessment. They would honestly state "I forget that point...." for example when they could not remember the pointed matter. The reading duration was generally getting 10 minutes longer than it used to be.

b) Did you select your own reading materials?

Concerning this question, most of the students find their own reading materials. This indicates that their good awareness on finding their own reading texts. People tend to be more interested to read their own selected texts than other people's selection. Still, some other students share with their classmates. This is due to their lack of creativity of how to find reading texts and how to make use of the technology instruments such as mobile phone which is information-rich resource. What they think as reading materials is the ones which are printed and are commonly found in libraries. Meanwhile, at present, students are not anymore interested in spending hours sitting in libraries to read any reading texts. This is because doing many things about making social interaction with their cell-phones such as texting, twittering, face-booking, what-apps messaging, and even playing games is much interesting. They read their friends' messages but what they do is

not purely intended to read. However, willing to share reading materials among their peers indicate their effort to find texts to read and this is a positive indicator of willing to read.

c) Which reading materials do you like best?

The students' response to this question is that the most favorite reading materials among them are narrative texts, a very simple short story, and fairytales. There are 25 out of 33 students (75%) who like reading those kinds of reading materials. For them, such a reading type is more entertaining with which the readers are entertained and are happy after finishing their reading. They commonly do this because they want to and enjoy it. Meanwhile, 5 out of 33 students (15%) like to read articles of various topics such as health, sport, religion, history and social problem. The different number of percentage is quite long. As obtained from interviewing them, it is revealed that reading those kinds of texts need more concentration to understand what is beyond the text. So that they usually read those types of texts if they need some information contained in the texts. In addition, they need to provide a certain time to understand because they believe that these kinds of texts are more difficult to understand. Unlike reading literary

works which they usually do for killing their spare time. This shows an ease for them to get the joy of reading. Finally, there are only 3 out of 33 students (10%) who like reading other types than the mentioned above types, for instance advertisement, newspaper, movie subtitles. This is because of some states. For example in suburban areas as that in which the research was done, economically, it is not easy for them to find ads and newspapers except for those of the middle class that are able to subscribe them. Moreover, at present they tend not to be too interested in such texts.

d) What is the summary of your favorite reading materials?

Concerning this interview question about the students' favorite reading materials, each student could interestingly tell the summaries of their own favorite selected texts. This shows that they completely read the materials they have had selected. Furthermore, this indicates that their reading interest is gradually getting nurtured.

e) How long do you read your selected materials?

From the students' reading log, it can be seen that at the very first time they only spend about 20 minutes at average in a day to read. It was even found that some of the students did not

spend any second to read anything. This is because of some reasons such as they think that it is difficult to find reading materials and they did not know what to read. They also think that it is not easy to understand English reading materials which are resulted from a very limited number of vocabularies. Most importantly, they have no willing, courage, motivation, and interest in reading English materials. The problem detected from the result of the interview is that they do not like reading English nor Indonesian reading materials. So, it is accepted that they could only spend some minutes for their reading activities. Yet, after about five weeks to have this VRP which is like doing reading by force, most of them declare that they come to an awareness to change their classical beliefs that reading comprehension in English is not easy, it is difficult to find reading materials in English. They come to an understanding that they can start reading texts that they think the simplest and easiest ones. At the end of this program, they feel to start enjoying reading.

- f) What difficulties did you find during the reading practices?

From the result of interviewing students and analyzing the students' reading log, the biggest problem during

reading practices is vocabulary. Such a problem is considered as the obstacle to comprehend the whole text. Therefore, the students did not dare to select longer text which they taught as more complicated texts to understand. In addition, they did not know strategies of reading and the way of selecting reading materials. They keep on translating the difficult words found during their reading activities. As a result, it takes time for them to completely finish reading and even this brings to their frustration to read English text.

- g) What interesting things could you get from your selected reading materials?

What makes most of the students interested much in reading narrative texts or simple short story is that they have plot which bring the students about being more challenging to do some previewing or predicting. In addition, those types of reading materials contain moral values meaningful for their lives as well. They furthermore thought that reading short stories can make them emotionally involved, so that they would feel to be a part of the story. Finally, their reading interest is gradually established.

Post Reading Program

From this step, it was found that some of the respondents (23 students/ 69 % of the students) claimed that this VRP is helpful to stimulate their reading interest. Before joining this program, they were aware that they did not have good awareness to read both Indonesian and English reading materials. Yet, after attending this program which they first do “force reading” to volunteer reading, their reading interest is stimulated. Besides, it is found that 8 out of 33 students (24%) think that their interest of reading is not really stimulated because of some indicators. First, they did not always feel happy with their reading practice since they only did this to fulfill the passing grade of this course although this course has no credit point, but it is possible for them not to pass the course so that they have to take this course in another upcoming year when this course is offered. Their reading materials were not as various as those who completely enjoy attending this VRP. The other 7 % of the students were not really involved in this program because they did not voluntarily read during the program. They only read for the last three weeks of the program with only limited number of reading materials and short

reading duration (about 20 minutes every day).

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

The result of this research reveals that the Voluntary Reading Program (VRP) which was conducted in seven weeks has positively affected the EFL students' reading interest. As they claimed that after attending this program, they start to be interested in voluntary reading English. What is voluntarily done by the EFL students is that they do not only select their own reading materials, but they manage their own reading time as well. This indicates that they do real reading since they have set their own reading materials, their own purposes of reading, and their own reading strategies when they encountered with some problems. These clearly indicate that this VRP has brought them about interested in reading English. The finding of this research is line with some previous studies on Extensive Reading which proves to be able to provide readers with very effective platforms for promoting reading improvement and development from elementary levels upwards (Bell, 1998). Furthermore, this can also call on personal reading interest and levels and encourage both dialogical interaction and reflective thought within oneself

and in collaboration with peers in a virtual environment as well (Liang, 2004) and the choices of the materials contribute to the participants' overall enjoyment of reading (Jones, 2010). As found in this VRP program, that the respondents have built good collaborative English readers. They do not get stuck in difficulties to find out reading materials anymore, since they can share the reading texts each others.

To sum up, students involved in this program get progress in their reading from near-zero reading English texts to voluntary reading which is indicated by the increasing number of reading duration, the variety of reading materials, and reading motivation. This VRP program is then proved to be one of the effective ways to attract students reading their own selected readers. Still, it is found some problems during doing this recreational program. They are the limited number of the EFL students' English vocabulary, reading strategies, and the availability of English reading texts. Therefore, the results of this result might give some insights that English lecturers need to encourage their EFL students to read English text through some strategic ways, such as Voluntary Reading Program, because this program has proved to contribute to the development of students' reading interest. Moreover, concerning the

difficulties during their reading practices, it is necessary for English teachers to introduce them the strategies of reading English, so that they are not anymore stagnant in defining the text. This will, at the same time, be useful to help them increasing the number of their vocabulary.

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